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ABSTRACT

This paper explores questions about why high school English teachers do and do not teach works that they consider to be controversial. It examines the barriers, both internal and external, that these teachers experience and how they perceive the barriers. The teachers were nine participants in a summer university seminar for teachers which focused on Alice Walker's novel, "The Color Purple." Data consisted of materials that the nine teachers produced during the seminar; interviews with them a year and a half after the class; and informal conversations, interchanges, and observations. Analysis of the data revealed that when confronted with teaching controversial material, some teachers experienced emotional anxiety which reflected their own beliefs and fears about the issues in question, fear of disciplinary action by school authorities, concern about students' ability to handle controversial material, and concern about their own ability to present the material adequately. If teachers are to remain engaged and active throughout their careers, it is necessary to find ways to support them in their efforts to bring more realities into the classroom, including emotional realities. (IAH)

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Cooling *Hot* Topics

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I. Introduction

The questions I explore in this paper are about why teachers, and in particular, high school English teachers, do and do not teach works that they consider to be controversial. What are the barriers, both internal and external, that they experience and how do they perceive them? I take my working definition of the term "controversial" from the teachers I interviewed. There was a surprising amount of consensus among them about a definition. Rebecca put it well:

> I consider controversial literature works that deal with topics that stir strong emotions in people and I am thinking of topics of rape, topics of incest, topics of extreme violence, topics of homosexuality... just all of these things that people just have no neutral stand on. They feel strongly about it, one way or another. Literature that had a strong pro-choice stance, I would consider that controversial. Anything like that where people, where... I could see one group of people being very much against it because it scared them for whatever reason. So, I look at it more as the themes that are projected in the literature.

Angela added a component to this definition that I would not have gotten to as quickly on my own: "Very personally, it [i.e. "controversial"] means I might get called up before the Board."

In my exploration with teachers of their feelings and practices about the teaching of works that opened up difficult emotional material and that might put their jobs at risk, I found parallels to the work of other researchers who study denial and resistance. Hochschild's account of the emotion management that occurs in both the private and public lives of most Americans, but particularly of those who are in the service professions, provides a context within which to understand the resistance of educators to support genuine emotional, and not just intellectual, engagement in the classroom. Hochschild's description of the creation of an environment and a tone that discourages spontaneous emotional response might well characterize many high schools and district offices:

> Institutions arrange their front stages. They guide the way we see and what we are likely to feel spontaneously. Consider the inevitable institutional halls, especially those near the areas where people wait. Often in medical, academic, and corporate settings we find on the walls a row of photographs or oil paintings of persons in whom we should have full confidence. [1983:50]

Hochschild argues that it is precisely the lack of spontaneous affect that becomes the mark of the professional in our culture. Airline stewardesses, doctors, waiters, teachers learn to present the appropriate emotions (nurturing, protectiveness, calm, etc.); they learn to edit out their own strong emotional responses as inappropriate, threatening to their positions and their clients' feelings of safety. To put it simply, these professionals learn to not express their personal feelings; eventually they do it so well that they may lose track of them. Many professionals in our culture are taught not just how to act toward their clients, but also how to feel toward them. Describing the training of new camp counselors in a camp for emotionally disturbed children, and in particular the injunction to be warm and caring and governed by a professional stance, Hochschild records the emotional cost to the new counselors and the expectation that this is one of the meanings of professional behavior:

> To be warm and loving toward a child who kicks, screams, and insults you -- a child whose problem is unlovability -- requires emotion work. The art of it is passed down from senior to junior counselor, as in other settings it passes from judge to law clerk, professor to graduate student, boss to rising subordinate. [1983:52-53]

Shor tells us that despite the typically dulling effect that institutional education can have on one's intellectual and emotional growth, classrooms can be a place where human beings are engaged on many level. For Shor

> The liberatory class can be a place where culturally censored information is exchanged. This is its kiosk and new-service role. Announcements of political events not covered by the mass media can be made here; all kinds of newspapers, periodicals, books, pamphlets, posters and magazines can be shared....This makes the liberatory class a lone and essential source of critical information, which can disrupt the neat encirclement of thought in daily life. [1980:122]

In order, however, for teachers to create such classrooms, they must feel a certain amount of confidence in their students, their administrators, colleagues, school boards, and in their own ability to safely engage their own and their students' strong emotions in the classroom.

McNeil describes the way in which a group of high school social studies teachers remove their own complex individual understandings of world events in order to present a curriculum that they feel will prevent students from challenging their teachers' authority, the teachers' efforts to control emotion:

> Despite Joint Council on Economic Education policies to the contrary, these teachers did not need more training or materials in order to deal with the economy in a more complex manner. In interviews, they revealed very complex knowledge of controversy, of future economic dislocations, of imperfect institutions, of complicated topics. They said in these interviews that to deal with these realities might make students cynical, as students had been during the Vietnam war protests. Time and the teachers' own energies did not allow for adequate discussion of the controversial, complicated and sometimes unpleasant realities of American and world economics and politics. So they decided it was better to present a factual overview and let students discover the realities after they left school. The teachers, then, were bracketing their personal knowledge in order to get through the 'official' knowledge of the course. [1986:76]

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The data that I've examined in order to answer questions within the frame of teachers' issues about emotion control and the teaching of controversial works consists of materials that nine participant teachers produced during a seminar that I taught for them on Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* about two years ago, interviews that I conducted with them a year and a half after the class, and more informal conversations and interchanges I've had with them in the intervening time, as well as observations and field notes from the original seminar. Before, however, moving to a description and analysis of the data, I will tell you the story of the seminar and the genesis of the research project of which this essay represents a part.

II. The 1989 Summer Seminar for Teachers on *The Color Purple*

The Anxiety of Beginning

In the summer of 1989 I taught a seminar for teachers at the University of California, Davis, on Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. My plan, as I advertised it in the flyer that went out to various Northern California teachers within commuting distance of the campus, was to "consider various approaches to the novel, and discuss it in the context of some of her essays, short fiction, and poems." The object of the seminar was to provide teachers with an opportunity to be readers together of a rich, contemporary novel that raised multicultural and

gender issues; concerns about teaching it would come second. As I put it in the flyer: "The primary goal of the seminar will be for participants to immerse themselves in the experience of reading and discussing the novel. Toward the end of the week, we will discuss teaching *The Color Purple* in the context of our own experience of reading it."

At the time I felt excited about the course and initially only worried about whether or not I would get enough participants. It was the first extension course I would teach for teachers, and I was at that time a relative unknown to the teachers who were involved in Davis' various staff development efforts. I had been teaching in the English department as a lecturer primarily in composition, though my Ph.D. was in English literature, and working half time for what was then called the Office of University-School Programs in the Division of Education as co-editor of a new journal on composition research. I was eager to teach literature to older students, particularly to teachers, and looking forward to the opportunity to discuss a novel written by a woman of color.

A week after we sent out the flyer, four or five calls came in inquiring about the course. Three of these calls were from teachers who wanted to know if most districts would allow the book to be taught, if there were districts that included it on their accepted reading list, if in fact there was a way to teach the book, and whether or not I would also be discussing other works by Walker that would be more teachable, less controversial and more age appropriate.

Two of the callers were specifically concerned that I realize the book was unteachable because of school boards' and administrators' prohibitions. They seemed to be calling to warn me and also half checking out their own sense of reality. They gave me some information and shared frustration but did not inquire about the particulars of the course; both had been told by their districts that they couldn't teach the book long before the issue of taking my class came up. At that point I was not engaged in a research project studying the teaching of controversial literature and thus did not keep careful field notes about the conversations. I don't therefore know what went into that word "told." I'm not aware of whether at some earlier date these two teachers formally petitioned their school boards and were refused, or whether someone in a position of authority let them know more informally that the book couldn't be taught, or whether they had assumed, based on the feel of the district and/or remarks that they'd heard, that it would definitely not be acceptable reading. None of the callers was forthcoming about what in particular about the book was so problematic. There were, as I recall, some vague references to

sexuality and abuse but no one was very specific. None of the callers objected on the grounds of the depiction of the black male as violent and abusive to black women, the issue that had drawn severe criticism for Walker within the Black literary community when the book was first published.

I was surprised by the calls; neither I nor several colleagues in the Office of University-School Programs with whom I had discussed the seminar, had anticipated these concerns. When a colleague and I had originally sat down to think through what novel I should focus on for this one week intensive course, trying to select a work that would capture teachers' imaginations and interests yet also be potentially useful for a high school English curriculum, we had eliminated Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, despite our belief in its genius, because we felt most teachers would find it much too complex and dense in its structure, language, and concepts for most high school seniors. *The Color Purple*, by contrast, had seemed much more accessible and emotionally comprehensible for a high school audience; it was, after all, the story of a young girl's growth, her entrance into womanhood and literacy, her movement from powerlessness to power. We concluded that the tale of survival and growth, in its seemingly simple letter form (the novel is made up of a series of letters written primarily by Celie, the main character), would go over well with a high school audience. It was also short enough so that teachers who had never read it, or who wouldn't have time to read it before the seminar, could read it in one or two sittings the weekend before the seminar began.

I had taught the novel myself in several freshmen English classes at the University of California, Berkeley, and had never questioned or been asked about its controversial material by colleagues or administrators. In retrospect, my failure to anticipate the book's potential difficulty for high school teachers seems to reflect my own geographical and historical blinders as much as it does the difference between teaching high school and teaching college. Although most college teachers do have significantly more autonomy about their curriculum choices than do most public high school teachers, informal interviews with college teachers that I conducted after the four phone calls, suggested that many college teachers also refrain from teaching works like *The Color Purple* for fear of complaints from students to administrators about their professor's choice of books. One colleague told me that though she had taught the novel several times at another college where she worked part-time, she had a student complain to the chair of her department each time she taught it. Each time the complaint was about teaching a novel about lesbianism. More significant than the fact that my teaching took place at a university was, I

think, where and what that University was and at what point in time. For, as I discovered, there was also a range of freedom that high school teachers experienced in regard to whether or not they could teach this particular novel, which was conditioned by what kind of community their school was part of, that is, what the political climate in that community was like.

In addition to informally surveying college and high school teachers upon receiving the phone calls, I also called The National Council of Teachers of English and an organization called People for the American Way that monitors book banning cases. I wanted to know if there had been many reported cases of censorship of the novel. The tone of two of the callers had suggested that this book was being banned all over Northern California. I could only discover one case in Northern California in which *The Color Purple* had been "banned." While the two organizations I called had records of no such cases, Oakland friends of mine reminded me that an Oakland woman who had not herself read the book had protested the teaching of the novel at a school board meeting several years ago by reading out loud the passages that offended her. Although an official decision was never made, apparently school board members persuaded teacher involved to eliminate the book from the curriculum. I myself live in Oakland but had forgotten about the incident which had circulated among a relatively small group of parents and educators as a good but disturbing story. I began to wonder if the teachers who had called me, and presumably other colleagues of theirs, had had experiences similar to that of the Oakland teacher, experiences that never made the papers. I also became curious about the anxiety level of all the callers. It was as if the very fact that I would offer such a course made them nervous and disoriented, put them on edge.

The nine teachers who eventually participated in the seminar came from varied teaching experience and for different reasons. One was a third grade teacher who wanted to learn more about the issues that come up in black literature. She had been reading the works of Patricia McKissack to her students and was curious about Walker. Another was a high school social studies teacher who taught among other things, world history and American government. She worried at the beginning about being surrounded by "English types," and the possibilities of a discussion that would be too literary for her and not useful to her own teaching. The other seven were English teachers, six at high schools and one at a community college.

All wanted to learn about the novel because they'd read it and loved it, though most started off skeptical about the possibility of teaching it in their school. All of the teachers were women; none was a member of an ethnic minority group. All expressed interest in learning more about novels, stories, and poems by contemporary women. On the whole, I would say they were much more focused on Walker's femaleness than on her blackness. Seven of the participants had read the novel before seeing my flyer. The two who hadn't had seen the film.

Though most of the teachers said they were taking the course because they were interested in enriching themselves through a week of immersion in literary works written by a compelling woman author (which would indirectly help their students, they knew) while they also could use the 2.5 units, teaching came up early on in our discussion. I can't remember whether I first asked the question or whether it arose from one of the participants, but sometime during the morning of the first day we found ourselves arguing about whether or not the book was teachable and whether or not it would be worth all the trouble it would create to try to get it approved by administrators and school boards. Most of the teachers assumed that they would be unable to teach the whole book in their schools. Some told stories of censorship in their districts, if not in their own schools. A couple said they could teach whatever they wanted -- even these teachers, however, had reservations and doubts about what constituted appropriate material. They said they thought their students could handle it if assigned, but that they might be too young to fully understand the issues at stake. They also expressed the wish that they be introduced during this week to "more teachable" or "safer" books by Walker, books, stories, or essays that would contain what they saw as her magical/compelling voice but in a safer arena. During the first morning discussion, our talk about the book's difficult material was very general: some mentioned incest and abuse, but no one got down to passages or actions of specific characters. No one said anything specific about what they feared happening in the classroom though they were clear that they felt they would get into trouble with parents, school boards, and school and district administrators.

A word here about the set-up of the course. We met every day for a week from nine to three. We took an hour break for lunch; often the participants lunched together in small groups. On two or three of the five days, I joined one of these groups. For the seminar, we arranged ourselves around a rectangular table that had lots of surface area for xeroxed reading materials as well as for the food we began to bring for each other. I asked two guest lecturers to lead the discussion for

an hour and a half each on the second and third days. (The first speaker did a workshop on the construction of the American literary canon; the second talked informally about how she taught the novel at a community college. Both speakers were women.) On the fourth day, we watched the film of the novel together. Other than these interludes we were talking and writing together for the five days from nine to three. Because of the length of the days, the fact that there were in total only nine of us talking and writing together for such long stretches of time, and because, I think, we were all women, all teachers, and all excited by Walker's novel and in love with literature, among some other factors, a kind of intimacy developed during the week that set the stage in a sense for my study of these women.

I came to class that first day and every other with a box full of xeroxed materials: essays and short stories by Walker, critical articles on the novel, essays on the writing of Black feminist criticism, newspaper articles about what books students read in high schools across the U.S.. Every day I and others wrote on the board titles of books that we wanted others to read, the essentials, as we saw them, essentials, that is, for a crash course in feminist literary studies.

One of the first things I was surprised by that first morning was the eagerness of seminar participants for information -- ideas, references, stories about my classroom, titles, speakers. I had expected teachers who already had had opportunities to discuss works like *The Color Purple* and who would be more at home with the particular controversial issues it raised, who would, in short, speak about the work with less enthusiasm for Walker's project -- and perhaps with less awe of the artist. Though I had wanted to do the seminar in order to provide a forum in which teachers could simply be readers because I knew as a teacher myself the isolation of the classroom, I had, I think, underestimated that isolation. What I saw that first morning was how initially self-conscious the participants felt about participating as readers of literature -- one of the reasons, I think, that the conversation so quickly turned to teaching.

The participants expressed concern about parents, administrators, colleagues and school boards criticizing, if not censoring, their efforts, and about students' relative maturity levels and ability to appreciate the issues the novel presents. There was a kind of general, unspoken seeming agreement about what these issues might be. No one said that she herself was uncomfortable with the novel's material. We dodged around the novel's concern with sexuality.

I had on the first day as a way to break the ice asked everyone to write a letter in the voice of one of the characters or to one of the characters or from a friend to a

friend. Of the first day letters that seven of the nine participants gave me at the end of the course, none is about either the lesbianism or about physical abuse, either of black women by black men, or of black people by white, although one did mention the demeaning of black missionaries by their white counterparts. We all read our letters out loud in class that day; the two I don't have copies of now did not address these subjects either.

The letters demonstrate a remarkable creativity and sympathy for Walker's characters. Most focus on messages of encouragement and are written in an upbeat tone. Four of the seven clearly focus on Celie's ability to forgive, hope, and grow, or offer her messages of encouragement to go on in the struggle to do these things. Anna wrote a letter from Nettie to Celie:

> It seems this is the first letter you expressed sympathy care/concern toward Pa. You have always been the caring type, so your sympathy for his wife Daisy didn't really surprise me. But it seems this is one of the earliest letters where your forgiveness of those who harmed us comes through. I wonder if your ability to feel sympathy was instigated by the news of Pa's death, or if enough time and space had passed between the two of you that forgiveness was forthcoming.

Maya wrote a letter of encouragement from Shug to Celie. She concluded with lines that do echo closely the tone and mood of the affirmation that runs interwoven with anger and pain throughout Walker's novel:

> No, God ain't no man. I thank God on it. It in the trees, and the grass and in innocent babes. It in peoples what show love for one another.
>
> Why Celie, it be in you, so don't give up on God, it be too much like givin up on your own self.

Only one letter presented pain unmediated by hope for change and the comfort in shared struggle. Samantha's letter from Celie to Nettie is striking in its contrast to that of the other teachers:

> To learn that we were sold. Why? Such pain and suffering that we have endured and for what purpose?... My life with Mr. ___ is awful. I hate his children and I hate him. There is no feeling between the man and myself. In fact, Nettie, I hate all men. They no good. All they want is one thing and that is to plop on top of you and then so on. I am happy for you Nettie for you have left this life. I hope that yours is better than mine. There is no love nor joy. I do not believe I will ever find either. I do not think you will ever receive my letter but I write to you anyways.

Also, that first day, we made a list of categories or themes that we might address in a class anthology. Each participant would turn in a list of passages or letters that related to one of these themes, keeping track of them as they came up in our discussions. The teachers would then have them available to work from if they wanted some passages to get students started looking at the novel in different shapes. The topics I suggested at the beginning of our brainstorming session ran the gamut from creativity to physical abuse.

Only five of the seminar participants turned in the list of references to a theme or subject for our seminar concordance to *The Color Purple*. We brainstormed topics that first morning and I did make some suggestions but I also made clear that people should choose whatever interested them. I had agreed to preface the concordance with a kind of table of contents for the novel which would identify the writer of each letter, its number in the series, and its page number in the edition we used. The lists turned in were: entrance of characters, clothing images, couples, references to trees, and moments of extreme violence or abuse, physical or verbal. The other topics brainstormed that day that did not appear, at least in the materials that were turned in, were abuses (of any sort), moments of joy, moments of surprise, children born, colors mentioned, difficult slang, and references to theology. The fact that abuse appeared twice in the list we brainstormed suggests that the dark aspects of the novel were on everyone's mind. On the other hand, the themes people finally chose to track were, for the most part, the less troubling ones, ones that would not tend to raise as directly the novel's concern with female sexuality, sexual orientation, pantheism v. Christianity, or specifically white oppression of blacks. The fact that the only controversial topic that was turned in for the concordance, moments of physical or verbal violence, was done by Anna, the member of the group who for a variety of reasons had a different stake in the group's addressing of some of the novel's core concerns than did the other participants.

I went home after that first day exhilarated but also disturbed. Driving back to North Oakland I kept feeling that something was going terribly wrong despite the lively discussion, the enthusiasm, my feeling of excitement about working with such an intelligent, warm, and eager group of readers. By the time I got to my door, I knew what it was: somehow no one other than myself and one other person had said the word "lesbian." Eight of the nine teachers had talked about Celie and Shug's relationship as if it were simply a friendship. No one had asked any questions about Celie's and Shug's sexuality; no one had said that this was why they

might have trouble teaching it to their students. Similarly, I realized, no one had questioned the depiction of black males, wondered if Walker was being fair; not many of the teachers, if fact, had said much about black issues. I went over what I had said that day, what we'd done, what I'd asked. I almost regretted not having started with a short lecture situating the novel in its cultural place, insisting, as it were, on what the issues were, but then I would not have been happy if I had just superimposed it. There were xeroxed readings the teachers would do on these topics later in the week, but I felt that unless the issues came from the class itself, they would remain unintegrated into the class' structure of feeling, its operative affect.

Taking Some Risks

I returned the second morning of the course determined to talk as a group about the relationship between Celie and Shug, about the novel's portrayal of female sexual desire, and about its depiction of particularly black issues. As I then saw it, somehow we'd talked about the characters as if they could have been of any race living in any culture and at any point in time, we talked about them, that is, without going into detail about the particulars of their black or lesbian experience. This "going into detail" was something I felt had been missing on that first day. It was not, I felt, simply a function of a first introductory day, but of something else, of avoidance, a kind of looking the other way so as to stay with subjects that we could all agree on for the most part and which didn't call upon us to question each other and ourselves deeply.

On day two I began our meeting by asking everyone to spend ten to fifteen minutes writing something in the voice of a black person followed immediately by ten to fifteen minutes writing in the voice of a lesbian. I said I hoped we would all be willing to read them out loud when we were finished, but at any rate we should all try to write something. I prefaced the doing of this task by a candid portrayal of my angst riding home in my car and my feeling that we'd dismissed the novel's concern with lesbianism and blackness, and substituted the themes that left us perhaps less uncomfortable about difference and the issues of acceptance that it raises.

My teaching log reminds me that I felt several moments of confusion and distrust in the group before people began to write. My discussions with the participants in the days that followed substantiated my instincts. Even over a year and a half later, in the interviews teachers came back to these uncomfortable moments, reminding me that they had felt anxious, confused, dismayed, annoyed,

and in one instance very angry when I asked them to do this writing. As Jennifer put it "When you said that these are the issues we need to face that we're avoiding, I thought 'Oh no, this was a big mistake.'" And as Anna's letter began "Wow! Do I feel angry today... What this class has brought out in me is my own homophobia."

Almost everyone read both letters out loud. First we did one set, then the other. Seven people - one person of the seven did the black but not the lesbian - gave me copies of these letters at the end of the course. The letters written in the voice of a black person are interesting in their similarities. Maya's and Sheila's are in the voice of a black colleague who struggles with being the only black member of the English faculty, with isolation and the lack of understanding on the part of colleagues; Maya's dwells on the weakness of a curriculum that focuses only on black weakness, and includes *The Color Purple* in the critique, while Sheila's voices resentment and pressure. Sheila's entry begins:

> I'm Debbie. 31. Black. Single. At a faculty meeting I feel I'm the historic token. Did the district need one more person of color on the high school staff in order to get their precious federal allotment? you bet they did.... Will 600 parents expect more from me, more from their kids in my class? And am I going to be more responsible than a white teacher for the success of my black students? Will the criticism swell and explode when these kids continue to skip my classes and drop out at 26%? Do I stand alone? Feels like it.

Samantha's letter is also written directly in first person, but doesn't identify the speaker by profession or age. Hers focuses on the sense of oppression of being black and the need to speak out in order to survive it.

> I am black and feel my blackness everywhere which comes from within and without. At one time I ask mama "Why are we black?" She said because that's the way it is dear.... I looked all around after that and saw what was happening to my people and realized what being black had done to them and how they failed miserably to overcome their blackness in this white society. There are a few who make it but only too few. Yet when I see those people and listen and watch and read what they say, I realize that we have a richness and as much to offer everyone; we must not let silence keep us down! We must speak up and be heard.

Five of the pieces begin in the first person, although one of these is written in a letter form. Two of the teachers, however, wrote instead what I call "meta entries." In them they search for what feels to them to be an appropriate voice. Here is Kathy:

> Who am I? Am I a Bright Nelson whose diction and vocabulary I find close to perfection? Many don't like Bright -- they think he's arrogant -- I imagine his answer would be, "It is not important what others' perceptions of me are. What is important is how I perceive myself. I am thorough, well spoken and bright. And I make no apologies for it." Oprah Winfrey is a little bit more casual in her speech etc. When asked about her weight she might say, "*Girl*, I worked three months, three long months trying to get rid of this weight. It's off now. And, girl, believe me, I buy those sexy nightgowns -- I buy them by the case. And I love it." Felicia, my only black student in my sixth period class says she and her man don't get along. I imagine their conversations...

Anna too talks to herself in her writing about what it would be to write in the voice of a black person. Unlike Kathy she stays with her own voice throughout the entry.

> In order to understand the experience of any minority, I think it would be "beneficial" to one's understanding to connect first to one's own minority status (aren't we all a minority in one sense or another) and then try to place that self in another minority status -- in this case black woman and lesbian...
>
> If I was a black woman, my guess is I would socialize primarily with black people and probably more specifically black women. Why? Have you ever thought about why you choose the friends you do? Often for me it is because we share things... values, primarily... and a number of other common denominators and characteristics... When an individual is unable to make these connections (which I consider vital to happiness) she undoubtedly will turn away from those who for whatever reason do not let her be her real self and turn instead to those who not only encourage me to be myself but also nurture that self and help me see myself and my friends in this connected family.

While all the writers look for points of connection with black people and sympathize with the struggles that they have and continue to endure, the two entries which do not immediately assume the voice of a black person seem to me to demonstrate the writer's personal struggle to understand black experience and their sense of disequilibrium about the task, that is, it is difficult to replicate experience that you yourself have not had, if not impossible (and this assumes you see empathic replication as a goal). While several of the writers who take on a seemingly unmediated voice choose personas who offer grounds of identification (two are colleagues, one is a letter from a black friend the writer knew at college), the two writers who never give up their own personas write about their struggle to be other. Kathy's "Who am I?" and Anna's focus on her own need for connection and acceptance seem to me to grapple in some more personal way with the issue at

hand: How is it that one comes to understand someone else's experience? In the middle of her last sentence Anna changes the grammatical subject from an unspecified female individual to herself, demonstrating, I think, the tension in her entry between her effort to imagine someone else and her sense that this process starts with acknowledging the self's concerns. Her struggle surfaces in the verbal sliding.

Of the six letters written from a lesbian perspective that participants were willing to give me copies of at the end of the week, only Anna's is in first person. Anna, though wrote from a very different perspective from the other participants because, as the class discovered when she read her letter out loud, she is a lesbian. The other five letters were meta-entries, letters that demonstrate the anxiety about taking on a lesbian viewpoint and the struggle to understand what such a perspective would feel like. There's a continuum here. Samantha's is on the end closest to first person. After only one short sentence announcing her intention, she moves into a lesbian voice: "I'll write from Celie's point of view in the novel *The Color Purple*. I love Shug because she is good to me and she is warm and loving." She concludes the entry, "I love to hug Shug at night and I feel safe with her. She make me stand on my own. I love Shug." Maya's entry falls on the other end. She uses the subjunctive throughout so that the piece reads as a speculation. Her first paragraph suggests to me her resistance, if not resentment, of my raising of the issue:

> How different would my life be if I were a lesbian? It is difficult for me to imagine -- not because I fear it but because I believe that a person's sexuality is #1 private and #2 a very small part of what the total person is. So how different would my life be?

Despite her initial statement that sexuality makes up only a small part of personality, she goes on to speculate in some detail about the potential differences in her family life, relationship to children (if she had any), relationships to friends, her children's relationships to their friends (would they be ridiculed?), and her relationships at the workplace. Her fourth and last paragraph moves close to giving up the conditional, the last sentence suggesting that she is moving into the feelings of an imagined lesbian: "How differently would my peers treat me. Sometimes I think men are more intimidated by and afraid of gay women than they are by gay men."

Leslie's relatively short entry falls between these two extremes She moves in and out of personas and mood with some ambiguity:

> Labels! I don't like labels! If I choose to be a lesbian -- who cares! -- If I choose to be bisexual -- who cares! If I choose to be heterosexual -- who cares! It is the person (the being) inside who judges one's self.
>
> One's sexual preference should be a private, personal thing -- does this preference go on a job resume? -- does it affect job performance? No -- I don't think so. But -- I have to say, if I were lesbian I would probably be careful about my friendships and professional openness -- Too bad isn't it !!!

After Leslie read her piece she went on to tell the story of Sarah, who as Leslie described her, was a young acquaintance who confessed her lesbianism to Leslie with guilt and embarrassment. The point Leslie tried to make by telling about this incident from her life was that she didn't see Sarah any differently because of her sexual orientation.

Leslie's writing is characteristic of most of the letters written in the voice of a lesbian, in its movement from resistance and the more abstract and distant to a more personal engagement with what it might feel like to be a lesbian. In the cases of four of the five pieces of writing about this, the writers seemed to struggle with their own resistance to and difficulty taking in the voice of a lesbian. In the process they seemed to come to a more engaged consideration of the issue of sexual orientation

Initially it seemed to me that the teachers' willingness and/or ability to write with much less hesitation in the voice of a black person signalled a comfort level among them with multicultural issues, or at least with black culture, and that their resistance to assuming a lesbian persona meant that their uneasiness with sexual difference was greater than that with racial difference. This no longer seems the case to me. While I think it may be true that there's a discourse of cultural diversity that school professionals engage in, the discourse itself does not indicate a comfort with examining difference. If anything the discourse has come to seem to me to weight sameness much more than it does diversity. Thus I think many of the teachers found it relatively easy to assume a black person's voice because they imagined that person being like themselves when they feel alienated, alone, pressured, and so on. It was more difficult to imagine the many black experiences that might not so easily translate.

To some extent I believe the teachers struggled more with the lesbian writing task because we do not as a culture share a mandate to be liberal about sexual

orientation; lesbians and gays, for example, are not protected by many of the laws whose intent, at least, is to prevent discrimination based on race or religion. Along with this absence of a liberal mandate is the absence of a mainstream discourse that normalizes different sexual orientations. For the purposes of the seminar, this might have been a blessing in disguise. The participants doing this particular writing assignment had in a sense no choice but to struggle, having no available cultural scripts to draw from. It may be too that the set-up of the class -- ten women together discussing a novel that celebrates a lesbian relationship when most of the women do not know each other well and therefore do not for the most part know the sexual orientation of co-participants -- demanded that we seriously struggle with the issue and how little we might know about it, what resistance we might feel to knowing more.

Vulnerability and Movement Forward

Anna used her letter to come out to the class and to describe the discomfort that the class had thus far caused her. I quote her letter in full because the richness of the letter itself, the feeling with which she read it, and her candor and the discussion it prompted changed the direction and atmosphere of the class in many ways, made it much more emotionally and intellectually stimulating; I'm tempted to say it functioned as a kind of unplanned effective intervention. Other participants referred back to her coming out to the class several times during the rest of the week and several of the teachers mentioned it in the interviews.

> Wow! Do I feel angry today... What this class has brought out in me is my own homophobia... my own self-hatred... I rarely feel this way... but I now wonder if it is because I surround myself with friends and family who let me be me... who do not judge me because I am a lesbian but in fact love me -- regardless. Who either understand what it is to be a lesbian because they are lesbians also or... or what? ... as I think of this I realize the people whom I am the closest to are my lesbian friends... and that is why I feel intimidated in this class. I realize I have safely surrounded myself by people who "know me and love me," and I find myself in this class today somewhat ashamed and defensive of my lesbianism. The desire in us all to be accepted and liked seems very strong in me today... and I don't like it. This is what it feels like to be a lesbian. This is so strange because I am so often in joyous celebration of my sexuality... something weird is happening here.

Anna's voice seemed to me to shake as she began reading this, to grow stronger as she neared the end. When she was finished she put it down in front of her and stared at the class. The other teachers were quick to reassure her, to

appreciate her honesty, to share their own stories, concerns. Kathy told about her gay brother, her sympathy for him and the double life he seemed forced to lead at times, the way he was really no different from anyone else, her difficulty when she heard people, including colleagues, pass slurs and jokes about gays. Leslie read her entry and then told the story of a young lesbian friend who she had met at a conference, her first close friendship with someone who was a lesbian. I told about my feelings of frustration and confusion when one close childhood friend spent years not talking about her lesbian relationship, my inability to approach it, its toll on our intimacy. Other participants confessed their lack of knowledge, desire to know more about lesbian feelings and experience. We talked about one's self-definition as a lesbian, the difficulty of assigning names, labels, the difference between bisexuality and homosexuality, the many different expressions of sexuality, the communities that lesbian women often construct with other lesbian women, the difficulties and pleasures of friendships between straight and lesbian women, the emotional closeness and intense intimacy that often exists between women who are not lovers, what women feel as often missing in their relationships with men, nurture v. nature and sexuality, why Celie loves Shug, why Shug loves Celie, if Shug is a lesbian, and so on.

I felt that by the afternoon of the second day we had become a different group. If the first day had helped to establish some trust, the second morning session had established some genuine intimacy, an atmosphere of honesty, the ability of most of us to share confusion, self-doubts, questions, confessions of biases, mixed feelings, misconceptions, distaste, fear, and desire. As the discussion slid up and back between our own feelings and experiences and the characters in the novel and our interpretations of Walker's vision, a number of issues came up in depth that had only passed quickly during the first day. We began to be able to talk about Celie's love of Shug and distaste for men not only as a function of her abuse by her stepfather and husband, but also as a part of her being, her natural fabric of desire. Participants acknowledged that other women in the novel had been used badly by men but had remained heterosexual though all the sympathetic women characters, we agreed, relied on other women for emotional closeness and understanding. The issue of violence and force began to come up in a new way. We debated about Sophia's rage and the options available to her; we talked about Harpo's efforts to beat her and their physical fights. We moved to a discussion about black men in the novel, their feelings of impotency, the way their frustrations and feelings of powerlessness and victimization surface in their physical aggression against

women. We floated around the question of who was responsible finally and came to see, I think, in a way we'd avoided the day before, the indictment of the white culture that conditions the black male response in the novel even as the novel criticizes this response. We talked about what enabled Albert to change, to become, feminized, and we faced the fact that Celie still was repulsed by the idea of sleeping with him.

More significant for me as the seminar facilitator than the opening up of the novel that occurred on the second day, however, was the preparation that this day served for a movement into a wide reaching and relatively probing discussion of patriarchy, and its structures that occurred on the third. Participants seemed to come back to class on the third day with some new willingness to examine their own participation in many structures that they would now identify as patriarchal, oppressive, among them, the teaching of a literary canon in the high school that at the best marginalizes, and at the worst, excludes, works written by and about the experiences and feelings of contemporary women and that under-represents literary forms that reflect difference from mainstream white male culture. I don't think the participants would have had the stake in understanding some of feminist theory had it not been for our writing and sharing of our writing, our attempt to be other, and in particular, had it not been for Anna's intense and open communication of what she felt like as she sat and listened to us talk about the novel on the first day without talking about Celie's lesbianism, what it had been like for her to feel that she was different both in her sexuality and in her reading of the book from the rest of us.

And so the week went on. By its end we all knew a great deal about each other's insides, relationships to literature, teaching, other people, particularly other women. There was a lot of talking about mothers and daughters and some very explicit discussion of sexual pleasure, initiations, abortions, and so on. We read, talked, wrote and felt hard that week.

And so time passed, we went on with our lives, I sent out some materials to people (the concordance, copies of people's paper topics, a couple of letters that were both newsletters and quick personal updates), I saw some people informally at various teacher events, talked to some on the phone about having another class on a different book, about teaching controversial material, about my desire to write about our class and its participants. And finally, about a year and a half after the class, I did 40-60 minute more formal interviews with eight of the nine participants about their feelings, thinking, talking about and teaching of controversial books.

III. The Interviews

Editing Out Differences

Many of the teachers I spoke with tended to edit out cultural, gender, socio-economic, and ethnic differences in the multicultural literature they were teaching in the interest of creating a liberal, humane classroom environment. When they discussed their own feelings about *The Color Purple* or when they discussed their discussions of it with students they tended not to focus on the black rage, the lesbianism, the incest and physical abuses, or the particulars of Sophia's treatment by the white Sheriff and his wife. Instead they tended to stress Celie's individual successful struggle to survive, her journey toward personal freedom and fulfillment, her and Shug's amazing resiliency as characters. They focused on the individual's possibility for endurance and growth rather than on cultural and personal limitations, while stressing, too, in several instances, the similarities between individuals from different cultures rather than the differences.

For Kathy the important point was that Celie overcomes abuse and suffering. The following is her description of how she introduces the novel to students:

> I say it deals with these issues that may make you uncomfortable. There is the main character, Celie, who has very low self-esteem. There's this beautiful woman, Shug, who is a nightclub singer. They have a lesbian relationship. (Their eyes get real big.) In the meantime though you know a lot about Celie's background. The first third of the book is very tough to read because it deals frankly with a lot of abuse of Celie and if you don't feel you can get through that then just put the book back on the shelf. However, if you get through that and you move along, you will find that Celie grows as a person and gets really strong and that Shug grows as a person and they become very close friends, the kind of friendship that everyone would admire and that the children come back and you'll see her as a mother and see things happen that will make you feel very good by the time you finish the book.

Sheila, describing the use of the word "nigger" in *The Glass Menagerie* told about how she prepares her racially mixed class for the novel using a technique learned from another teacher:

> We write words that hurt, just take five or ten minutes and I put those up there and usually nigger is there and so is fat and sexual words go up there too. Gay and faggot come in. I try to direct the conversation to

> "We usually assign offensive names to actions or people we don't understand or are afraid of. So what are you afraid of? "Nigger?" What does "nigger" bring to mind?" They usually say "A large, black man." And I say, "Fine. What do you usually call a large, white man?" They would usually laugh and say "Sir." And I say "Well, it's not fair is it?" We talk about that and talk about how even age is a negative. If they're shopping and they walk up in their Levis and T-shirts to buy something at Macy's and I walk up, I will get waited on first. The little old lady comes over, I'll still get waited on first and she'll be second and they'll be third. So it isn't just race or age or sex. I think by putting it right out there for everyone to see, it looks naked, you realize that every one of us has been discriminated against in some way. It doesn't matter what color you are, what size you are, what age you are, everybody gets discriminated against.

Jennifer talked about how she prepared her third grade students for their studying of several black leaders in history. She teaches in a community that has, as she puts it, "a strong moral majority who is causing a lot of problems."

> I try to present people as individuals. I quite frankly don't put up a bulletin board that says "black history" not because I'd be afraid to, but because I think the real issue is the individual. For children I like the focus on that, at the same time using the word "black."

Although most of the teachers in this study were very concerned with including more women and people of color in their curriculum, almost all expressed an inclination to stress sameness rather than difference, and to focus on individual struggles, particularly those ending successfully, rather than on collective cultural accomplishments and defeats. Given the extremely difficult, if not impossible task, of helping their students explore the differences and sameness, victories and defeats in various groups' experiences, they tended to stress sameness over difference, victories over defeats.

Almost Anything But Sexual Orientation

The teachers expressed a range of feelings and opinions about what could and could not be taught or talked about in their classrooms because of parental, administrative, and school board prohibitions. To some extent these did reflect the politics and the community in which the teacher worked. On the other hand, five of the eight people I interviewed expressed serious concern about the consequences of discussing issues of sexual orientation with their students. Even teachers from

the most liberal districts saw the explicit description of a lesbian or gay sexual relationship as problematic, much more problematic than a description of a straight sexual relationship. Kathy described what constituted controversial material at her ethnically and racially mixed school:

> The thing that bothers students and parents the most is sexual identity issues. There are still a lot of people who say "If you read about a gay man, you could become a gay man." And it makes me very uncomfortable because I'm sitting in a classroom where I know statistically we have molested women, and I know we have gay students. Some of those ideas have to be approached and dealt with.

Angela, who teaches in a community considerably more conservative than that of Kathy's school, focused on the homophobia of many of her colleagues:

> How could I ever get away with teaching it *[The Color Purple]* out here because this area that this community is in is so homophobic... so incredibly homophobic...? My colleagues range from "it's a sin" to -- we are not exactly bible belt, but we are pretty conservative religiously in this area -- and they range from "it's a sin" to "it's distasteful" to "so, what's the problem?"

Angela explained that the only colleague responsible for teaching American Literature would not include Walker's novel because she found it "religiously offensive." When I naively asked her if it was the pantheistic view of God that she thought her colleague found objectionable, Angela corrected me: "That she is troubled with. But that doesn't trouble her nearly as much as that very short and lovely scene between Shug and Celie... It's a sin, it's a corruption, etc. You know, we all know why God wouldn't approve of that." Angela makes the book available individually to students while she will not risk teaching it: "I have in the past recommended Alice Walker to other students, making it very clear right away that I cannot tell them to read this book."

Sheila taught the novel in a Women's Literature class for colleagues in her district. She described the class' response about teaching the novel:

> People were staunchly for or against teaching it. For the first hour of discussions, it was a debate. It became very heated. Then I went in as moderator and said, "If the whole book could not be taught, what could be taught and what frightens you? What wouldn't our district go along

> with?" There were two parts. The first part is when the little girl is raped by the father and the second part was the bedroom scene between Celie and Shug. I thought that the first part could be taught because so many of our girls are victims of incest that it would just open doors and if they did not want to discuss it in class they could write about it. If they chose not to write about it there is always the alternative topic. But the majority of participants in the class did not even want to try to get the book accepted by the school district.

Sheila saw her colleagues' resistance as rooted in fear of students' as well as parents' reactions:

> Fear of opening it up and not knowing how to deal with it and the responsibility of after a student opened up what will you do with her and will she become attached and lean too heavily.

Though the prohibiting factors the teachers described might be different, there was some consensus about lesbianism and gay sexuality being too difficult to teach. Though the concerns varied from parents' and school boards' to students' reactions sexual orientation was described by almost all as problematic ground. In the more conservative communities the teachers by and large thought their students could deal with the material if allowed to. In places where the novel was already on the approved list or where it probably could be approved without too many problems, teachers asked more questions about their own and students' responses.

Limiting Talk about Sex in the Classroom

Though most of the teachers said there was little they would not teach because of student reactions, several stories came up concerning teacher discomfort. In most cases these had to do with sexuality. Rebecca, who now teaches German, French, and Spanish and no longer has any English classes, said she thinks she probably would limit herself to works she thought her students were mature enough to handle. She explained:

> I'm mainly thinking about sexual topics and just the fact that so often, I mean yesterday somebody wanted to know the French word for "shower," which happens to be "douche." Well I lost the class for five minutes because of that one word and so I think if these kids can't handle a word like "douche" without going off on all kinds of neat little jokes about that, how would we be able to have an intelligent discussion about homosexuality or lesbianism or anything like that?

Rebecca had brought up the issue of gender and sexuality in the classroom earlier in one interview when she explained that she used to teach in a Catholic all-girls school where she felt much freer to talk about a range of topics in the classroom:

> When I taught those three years I found that I was also pretty loose about my conversation, about making innuendoes, you know, talking about sexual topics and I really did not worry about it with the girls but I realized when I came over here to the public school that I couldn't do that, that I had to be much more conscious and much more careful about the vocabulary I used and about the things I talked about and so if I were to hesitate or choose not to deal with it it would be from that viewpoint that I wouldn't be sure of the maturity of the students and their ability to handle it.

After we talked more about this, she went on to discuss a boy in her class who has the effect of limiting her remarks there, moving from concern for whether the class could handle it to her own discomfort/anger:

> Even in German I can think of instances where I have two German 1 classes and I have one student, a boy, in my afternoon class, who just revels in innuendo and you know every opportunity he has to turn the conversation into something that has to do with sex or derogatory remarks toward females, whatever, he grabs that opportunity and I find that things that I may say in my second period class I will not say in that class because I know that he will take advantage of it and so I am much more restricted in that class because of him. It makes me angry.

Kathy, too, who elsewhere in our interview said that she felt confident she could deal with any subject in the classroom even if it brought back painful memories for her, gave an example of a case where she chose not to:

> I gave them a copy of ____[couldn't hear the tape here and don't recall specific title]. It's just a real quick chapter on roles of men and women and we talked about that. I was going to do this, but stopped because I wasn't feeling good being pregnant. In *Temple of My Familiar*, she does "the Gospel According to Shug" and on the summer required reading for honors they had to read part of the Bible and they read "Blessed are... blessed are... blessed are." I was going to have them compare and contrast this, but then as an adult over the summer this sounded great until I read things like, "Blessed are those who are born from love, conceived by their father's tenderness and their mother's orgasm." I could just see the class. And there's one over here that says "Blessed are those who love the lesbian, the gay, the strays, they love the

> sun," and I thought "Oh, here we go." I thought, "I don't have the energy to do this now." It is going to take a lot of pre-teaching. The worst stereotype that you can be labelled with at this school is that you're gay. That is the worst thing. You can call someone a nigger before you call them gay.

Kathy did not explicitly connect the pregnancy to her difficulty teaching except in the realm of "energy," but she would have been showing when she was teaching this material. I wondered about the meaning of this for her, though she did not take up my question directly even when I specifically invited her to. I also noted to myself that men don't have this problem. Even when they're about to become new fathers they visibly look the same as they did before. They also, I would hazard a guess, for a variety of reasons, rarely have female students who exert the same kind of sexual pressure or challenge that an aggressive male student will with a female teacher.

Like Rebecca and Kathy, though for different reasons, Samantha also brought up the issue of not teaching certain works and subjects that made her feel uncomfortable in the classroom. Repeatedly throughout our interview Samantha returned to the discomfort of having to "explain" so much to her class about the relationships and abuses in a work like *The Color Purple*. Below she described her changing feelings about the novel's place in her curriculum:

> Before I took the class [the Walker seminar], I wanted to teach it. I thought it would be good. I thought it was a woman's book and I wanted to put more women into the curriculum, and they [i.e. the characters] were black, which I thought was good. After reading the book and taking the class and looking at my students, I wouldn't be able to do it unless I had maybe upper division, honors 12. The students are not sophisticated enough to do it. I wouldn't feel comfortable presenting it. You don't understand how, especially in our school compared to the main campus, you go to the main campus and more students are sophisticated. They have a wider breadth of experiences and they're not so pampered and sheltered. However, this group, they wouldn't be able to understand all of these things they would pick up, that they would think are vulgar or whatever and I wouldn't want to sit there and explain that. I don't want to do that, all of it anyway. There's books [i.e. class sets of the novel that the school ordered] sitting on the shelf, but no one else will do it. There's a black woman who teaches honors 12, but she won't do it.

And later:

> You have to be able to see the relationship between Shug and Celie and understand that. Otherwise I think you lose. I really like the man [i.e. the character Alfred], the way he pulled away and the way he helped at the end.

> You're looking at a lot of people who had problems. If I have to explain everything, it takes away... I could do it if I didn't have to explain everything.

Throughout the interview Samantha grappled seriously with her own resistance to explaining the novel to her students, her discomfort with what she saw as their inability to understand on their own, from their own life experience, the richness and necessity of Shug and Celie's relationship. She was candid about her uneasiness, different from most of the other teachers I spoke with in her clarity about the fact of her discomfort. She expressed a lack of confidence both in her own ability to effectively present the material (because she herself is not yet comfortable enough with it) and in her students' sensitivity and maturity; again and again she expressed frustration, almost resentment of her students, for what she imagined would be their insistence that she go over the abuse, the incest, the lesbianism, line by line, that she be graphic, explicit, about each incident, though she believes that even if she were (at some cost to herself) the students still would not be able to appreciate the complexities and beauty of Shug and Celie's relationship. Samantha never explicitly spelled out the cost to herself of explaining the relationship, the violence, the incest, to her students. I left the interview deeply respecting her candor and seriousness about literature, and wondering about the meaning of the act of explicit explanation for her.

Who's Protecting Whom From What?

Jobs

When the teachers talked about why they would not teach certain works, issues about protection consistently came up. In some cases, the teachers said they were trying to protect their jobs and their value to their students, i.e. it wasn't worth losing a job over when students need good teachers who in other ways are willing to take risks, go further than most.

Explaining that she would not go to the school board to argue for teaching *The Color Purple* or a book like it to her class as a whole, and mentioning that no other teacher in her district that she knows of had done this either, Sheila explained her resistance:

> It would take courage and I think with my position and where it is now, I have tenure for seven years and I'm treated well for books and materials and conferences and all that. I've got to decide what is worth fighting for and what is not. If I can get around the school board by having five or ten copies

> of something in the classroom and for those five or ten kids out there, OK. I think it's a sensitive enough issue that I don't want to lose the place that I have now because I think I am a resource for the students. I have not gone to the school board now, but I can only think of one other teacher who will encourage off of the mainstream reading for boys and girls.

Leslie, a social studies teacher who had recently moved from a district with a diverse student population and relative freedom for teachers on curriculum choice to a very white and conservative district with little curriculum freedom for teachers, described hesitancy about including Walker's novel in a curriculum she was struggling to make gender-balanced:

> Girls need a chance to see something other than a male role model as an adult or in the history books, and that's one reason I'm working so hard on the gender balance. I think books like *The Color Purple* really make a difference. Depending on your district you have to be careful how you introduce it. It's suggestive reading is the way I have to present it now. I would have to be very careful whether I could bring it in and actually read passages out of it now. What I would do is possibly make reference to, but not use any of the graphic terms. I would actually tell them some of the themes that occur within the book, but I wouldn't be able to read the graphics.

Leslie went on to explain that it's not her students she is worried about but rather her job: "In the long run I think my students would remember me, maybe they would take some of that with them in their adult life. As a new teacher in this district I don't have tenure. I have to be very careful."

Feelings

Rebecca's and Samantha's comments above about their discomfort talking about sexual material reflected a different kind of self-protection. They worried not about their jobs but rather about their feelings; neither wanted to be made extremely uncomfortable while standing up in front of the classroom. Both Rebecca and Samantha also had concerns about the students' ability to get anything out of certain explicitly sexual descriptions and complicated relationships described in controversial novels, but while they had questions about what the students might or might not be able to calmly and intellectually discuss (i.e. without doing nervous laughter, jokes, innuendoes, asking for too much explanation, etc.), they were clearer about the limits of their own emotional comfort zone as teachers.

Books

Samantha and Angela described another kind of protection, protection of books, the material in the books, the integrity of the authors' vision. Finally this kind of protection may reflect back to the teachers' protection of their own vision of the books, their felt relationship with them and their themes, the teachers' own emotional relationship to art. Samantha began to discuss her protection of her students, moved into her protection of herself, and after I asked a follow-up question, explored her protection of Walker's work:

> They [students] can't handle it [the novel] as far as experience. If they read it, but then why am I trying to protect them? I don't want them to misundertand the whole thing, misunderstand the relationship that these women had. Or misundertand how she was abused and because of the abuse, she felt the love for this other woman and how this other woman was unusual. Shug was a neat lady. I could never be like her. I love that quality: she's very real. She has a marvelous resilience. Things bother me deeply and I can't move on for a while until I settle them down. She bounces all over, she comes out on her feet like a cat. If you haven't experienced things, you can't explain them. I could stand up there and explain until I'm blue in the face and I would be unhappy when I left.

I asked: "Are you also protecting the book, or Walker, or the vision? Do you know what I mean?" She quickly responded: "Yes. It's not something that's cheap. You have things that are sentimental. They take something from you. But this is not like that. There is something there, but it stays with you. It means something."

Angela, who candidly told me that the fear of being called up before the school board was the primary reason she gave works that she considered controversial out to her students individually (from her own collection) but resisted teaching them to the whole class, found toward the end of our interview another reason in her love for certain books. Like Samantha, she worried that she would be disappointed by her students' lack of understanding. She explained:

> I would get so frustrated if [they] did not get it, and all of a sudden I would be impatient that [they] did not understand or see the beauty, and it's right before their eyes.

She went on to talk about her fear that her extreme attachment to some works and her disappointment in her students' lack of appreciation for them would prevent her from being a good teacher, which she defined here as being "objective."

"Sometimes it is hard to take risks with something that I cannot be distant or objective about. Sometimes it is very hard for me to take risks."

As I spoke with Samantha and Angela about these issues their commitment both to their students' learning and to the works of literature were clear to me. Here was a strange irony, I felt. Their passion for the literature seemed to get in the way of their ability to share it with their students, or at least they thought that it would. Neither saw her emotional connection to the works and their characters as an asset in teaching, neither felt they could effectively use their attachment without being disappointed in their students and in themselves. If, I felt, they valued their strong feelings about the literature more as a potential teaching strength, they would probably be able to discover ways to use it in the classroom. I speculated that part of their anxiety about teaching these works was the prohibition on their own emotion in the classroom, that they both felt an injunction to be "objective," "distant," to "explain" rather than to share impressions and feelings about characters, images, moments, and so on.

Students

Several teachers talked about their students' lack of readiness to deal with subjects such as incest, lesbian love, violent sex and rape. In general the concern expressed was about students' "maturity" and their ability to "handle it." Only one or two teachers, however, were specific about what this might mean. Rebecca, as we've seen above, worried about snickering, sexual innuendoes, a general joking about sexual material. Samantha was concerned that students were not emotionally capable of understanding the material and thus would get little out of the reading or discussion.

Four teachers, however, expressed a strong counterveiling point of view. They felt that students needed to read work that would help them make sense of experiences that they were having anyway, whether their parents or school boards would admit it or not. Kathy, for example, told of her own experience with sexual bribery and her wish that she'd had teachers who'd discussed such things in class:

> "It would have been really nice if in high school I would have read this book and the teacher said 'People get in these situations. What can we do when we're in these horrible situations and we're scared to death? What do we need to say, what do we need to do to get ourselves out, when we're that scared? How do you get out of it safely?' It would have been nice if I had been in a classroom where we brainstormed some solutions, logical conclusions, because I had no basis for how to get out of that situation.

Several of the teachers too talked about the importance of validating students' emotional experience, students who'd been raped, etc., by teaching books that represented their real life dramas. In two cases the same teachers expressed both concerns, that is they worried both about protecting and over-protecting their students at different parts of the interview; neither, however, integrated these concerns at any given moment.

Integrating Concerns About Protection

Anna's remarks about the issue of protection were more extensive and elaborate than those of the other teachers with whom I spoke. I immediately felt when we started to talk that this was an issue she had given considerable thought and feeling to. In many ways her responses constitute a sort of dialogue between the different kinds of protection that I identified in the other interviews. Anna had been dealing with curriculum choices when I interviewed her. She had just turned in her syllabus for the first Women's Literature Class she would be teaching at her community college. She felt critical of herself for having only included one work by a lesbian writer, one that she included without thinking about it as a lesbian work but instead in terms of its genre (it's a journal), but also one that does not explicity discuss lesbian sexuality. Anna described her predicament as the first woman to teach this course at the campus for a while -- a man had been teaching it. She questioned whether or not she should teach it specifically as a lesbian woman. She decided not to but considered what it would be like to teach several works by lesbian writers in a women's literature course:

> I'm glad a woman is teaching it again. So what does that mean? ...So you say what do you think would come up if I'm teaching literature and I'm a lesbian and I teach more of it, well I think that a woman can bring more into a class on women and literature than a man can, and I don't know how I would leave it out. I suppose my lesbianism finally -- maybe one work, you could leave it out, but if you have three works, I think that I would bring something to the literature. I probably would leave it out and I'd be mad and angry

The issue of women teaching works by women, blacks by blacks, lesbians by lesbians, etc. did not come up in the other interviews.

Anna explained that in certain situations not coming out comes at a great cost. She reflected on her experience in our seminar:

> When I think about that class I remember being angry. I needed to come out in that class. Well I was so angry in that class because I didn't think I was

> going to have to come out in that class; I just never thought about it. I suppose if I did think about it I might have been a little more prepared and I'm not sorry I did by any means and it needed to happen but I didn't plan to, but I had to for that class, and I could see how the same would apply, could apply in my own class where I have these students for 18 weeks. How would I not? I don't know.

She went on to describe the progress toward openness about her sexuality at her workplace that she imagines as a possibility:

> I believe that it's possible I could be the faculty representative to the gay and lesbian student association. I can see that that would be a possibility. I think -- you know I'm tenured now -- that made a big difference -- boy I tell you -- I feel much more comfortable. It's only my third year on this campus and I feel pretty well respected, but I think I'd like to build that foundation a little more so that if a student came up to my dean and said I'm really bothered by the fact that Anna Ortez is teaching lesbian literature, my dean will support me, and I think he probably would, but I think it would be easier five years from now.

Anna's remarks suggested to me throughout the interview that even when she first got her job, she was less concerned with losing it than with being labelled or reduced in the eyes of her colleagues, students, and administrators. Anna talked too about providing a classroom environment that was safe enough for her students, but concluded that she didn't mind making students emotionally uncomfortable, implied that this might be a good way of getting them to think. The following description of her hesitation about coming out to her students suggests that one of her fears is a certain lack of thinking and feeling that can take place when you reveal yourself to those who don't know you well, that it may be easy for students to no longer see you or the works at hand because they might close down and label things according to stereotypes.

> I think that I'm a good enough teacher that I would be able to control my biases. I can't picture getting into a shouting match or an argument with my students. There have been times in a classroom situation when things like that have come up and I think I've handled them fine and I don't think that's what I'm concerned about... I guess (long pause here)... I think I don't want them, like I don't want anyone else, upon discovering I'm a lesbian, to feel differently toward me. I think that there would be a percentage who wouldn't feel any differently. I suppose there would be a few who would think of me at a higher level even. But I guess for those students somehow I will make them comfortable anyway -- that I don't think I have to come out

> to them. But I, I like the environment and the aura that I set in the classroom and I'm really afraid it would be affected by that, you know, as it is for other people. You know it's hard enough to sometimes tell friends you're a lesbian because all of a sudden you're somehow different though you know the first day of class to the last day of class I'm pretty much the same.

Anna's concern was both about her own feelings and about the nature of the classroom environment; she did not want students to misread her identity because of the personal pain of this but she also did not want the trust of the classroom environment to be disturbed by misconceptions and uncomfortable feelings. This movement up and back between her sense of her responsibility to herself and that to her students appeared again later on in the interview:

> I work pretty hard at having a safe environment and part of the dangers with that... I think people feel comfortable to say just about anything, so sometimes you have to deal with students saying things which other students may react to negatively or harshly and so then I do feel like it is my job as the teacher of the class to keep some sort of control -- I hate that word -- but you know, so that people feel comfortable. So I find, and I didn't really realize this, that it has to do less with my own reaction but my role in a classroom where I want everybody to feel comfortable. I guess that's not totally true. I don't mind making students feel uncomfortable.

But Anna reshaped this matter for herself again later on. When I asked her if there was any work she wouldn't teach if she taught in a school where she could be assured of the absolute support of her administration, colleagues, and community, that is, a fantasy school, she said:

> No. So I suppose there's the answer. I guess finally I'm less bothered by upsetting the students -- that implies I don't care that much about them which I know you believe is not the case -- but I think that that must be it for me. It's one of the reasons I'd hoped I wasn't going to have to teach high school, I'd hoped to become a community college teacher so I wouldn't have to deal with parents and would have much more freedom so here I am but I still feel the limitations. And I do think it will go away because I just get much more comfortable in every aspect of my life so I can see it carrying over into school also, but there's nothing I wouldn't teach -- that's a good question.

Though I felt it was clear from Anna's responses that she encouraged a lot of discussion and dialogue about specific issues in her classes, that she does not protect herself behind a lecture podium, I noted that she, like the other teachers with whom

I spoke, was uneasy about "negative" feelings surfacing in the classroom. I felt her tension between her desire for herself and her students to be clear, direct, and honest with each other and her fear that students might feel or say hurtful things. As I listened to and admired her struggle to understand her own and her students' discomfort in the classroom, I wished that there were more support for the shaking of norms, a shaking that only some teachers risk.

Teachers as Outsiders at School

Three of the teachers I spoke with articulated their positions as the curriculum outsiders at their school, the members of the faculty who were much more interested than their colleagues in changing the reading list to include works by women and people of color, but all but one of the eight I did follow-up interviews with expressed in some clear form their feeling alienated from most of the other members of their department.

When I asked Leslie if she felt the faculty in her new school had been relatively supportive of her effort to incorporate controversial material and material by and about women into her social studies curriculum, she responded quickly and clearly:

> No. We have a new state framework that the Social Sciences are supposed to be focusing on, but because we have not had what I would call in-depth workshops on this framework, everyone is doing their own thing. You have teachers who have been teaching Social Sciences for 15 or 20 years and those teachers are not going to change their curriculum now... Having taught their curriculum in the same old, worn out format for so many years it just hasn't entered their mind at all. In fact I mentioned it to one of my colleagues the other day, I showed him a lesson plan. He goes, "Oh what a fantastic thing to do." I said, "This is a step into gender balanced curriculum." He said, "What?"

Kathy described her department's efforts to design a new elective course in controversial literature:

> They're working on it for 12th grade. They're thinking of a Women's Lit course or the word that's becoming almost useless now, the Multicultural course. It would only be offered at the 12th grade level and I think it would be really valuable. Then of course only certain people who ever read that stuff would want to teach it so that would narrow us down to two or three people. Two or three out of the 18 in our English Department would teach that class.

The sense, however, of being apart from colleagues was expressed too by teachers who did not view themselves as movers and shakers of the school or curriculum. Angela explained to me what she meant by calling herself the "school radical:"

> Both internally I know I am because sometimes it's very..., you know, I just really get tired of always having to espouse who I am simply to be allowed to be who I am, because I am defensive. I get defensive and I get tired of being defensive. But I have friends who, you know, I am either a joke, the joke, or get a kick out of it.

She explained that the "friends" are her colleagues at school, but that she doesn't feel understood by them, doesn't feel that they would support her efforts to teach controversial works, that, in fact, they would fight her choice of a book like Walker's novel.

Samantha too described feeling distant from her colleagues, that she felt there was no forum in which they could as a group comfortably discuss their curriculum choices and teaching approaches. She described her anxiety about how much she challenges her students and her wish that she could discuss such issues with her colleagues:

> Am I pushing them too hard? I look at some of their other English curricula. We have a very weak [word unclear] in the English department and the teachers are petty. I don't want any part of it. I do what I do. I'm fair. But I am not one to show films. The other lady will show films. But don't criticize me because I want to spend five weeks on Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet*, when she wants to show a film. And that's what they do. Each to their own. You should have a department where all of you can sit down together and have support for trying different things. You don't have that too much.

Conclusions and Questions

The teachers taught me a great deal by speaking with me about their experience, concerns, hopes. As I've pondered their remarks and the experience and materials from our seminar, I've recognized that the issues about the teaching of controversial material in the schools, and in particular in high school English classes, are embedded, perhaps inextricably, in issues about contemporary American culture, and particularly white middle class culture. There are two points I'd like to stress by way of concluding.

The first is that the deep structure issue in most of the discussions I had with teachers was one of discomfort with the expression of deep, raw, painful emotions in the classroom. All of the teachers expressed an assumption that they would remain sympathetic, cordial, unthreatening to their students no matter how controversial the material they taught was. They imagined part of their job as making the students comfortable with the work at hand. Only Anna said she felt OK about making her students uncomfortable, and even she worried about it to some extent. Even if material touched strong painful emotional chords within themselves, the teachers said they would remain calm, in control, always sympathetic to different points of view. Two teachers explicitly said they would not teach works they felt they could not be dispassionate and objective about, works which might cause them to share more of their personal emotions with the class than they thought acceptable.

It seems to me that both teachers and students pay a price for the mandate to be always fair, sympathetic, objective, openminded. The deepest emotional states and remembrances of these states preclude such constant detachment. If we demand of teachers and students that they leave many of their strongest feelings and deepest concerns at the door, we encourage the classroom to be a place that focuses primarily on sameness, successes, and what we define as normal. Experiences of most individuals and many minority groups may easily fall out of this range of acceptable emotions, experiences, and topics.

The second is that if we want teachers to remain engaged and active thoughout their careers, we must find ways to support them in their efforts to bring more realities into the classroom, including emotional realities. We should not sacrifice engagement with important realities and strong feelings about them any more than is absolutely necessary to the creation of the necessary amount of safety in the classroom. Most of the teachers I spoke with, I think, could not begin to dramatically change their school curriculum and their teaching practices without the understanding and knowledge of their administrators, and without the belief that parents and school board members would allow them to experiment with new forms of classroom engagement and curriculum. Almost all of the teachers said that they felt the classics were safe even when they contained material that the teachers themselves knew to be subversive in some ways. The historical distance provides the safety net, for these works do not tap as easily the raw emotions of students and parents because they do not directly and explicity refer to contemporary situations and concerns. If high school English teachers are going to truly begin

teaching a mainstream curriculum that is balanced in gender and ethnicity, they must be offered the emotional as well as the political and technical support necessary to experiment.

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